

ALLOCUTIO, SENATUS, 1 NOVEMBER 2015

The conclusion of the Synod on the Family and the approach of the Year of Mercy is a good moment to reflect on the great theme of mercy that Pope Francis is emphasising so much. For any Christian, but especially for us as Legionaries, servants of the Mother of Mercy, mercy must be a central theme of our faith and our lives.

The Synod with its reported politics illustrated that mercy itself can be a divisive topic! It's good to show how some of the Synod's apparently opposing trends can really, in the fullness of the Gospel, be brought together in a complementary harmony. One might have thought, from the words of some commentators, that the Holy Spirit was about to finally abandon the Church after two thousand years, and that the Church's teaching would be changed. In fact, the Synod's final advisory document to the Pope does in so many ways what the Church has always done – restate the unchanging faith (which is ultimately the Gospel and Message of Mercy), yet always applying that unchanging faith to present circumstances according to the mind and heart of Christ. We always seek to ensure the liberating truth of Christ is really accepted into the actual lives of as many people as possible.

Sometimes a false contrast is set up between God's law and his mercy, as though God himself were a split personality, and didn't really approve of the 'strictness' of his own law. So on the subject of divorce and remarriage (much referred to at the Synod), often enough those who uphold Christ's teachings on marriage are berated as 'Pharisees', and those who would nullify Christ's teaching are held up as more compassionate and 'Christ-like'.

This is a bizarre reversal of the reality, in which of course in the gospel it's precisely the Pharisees who stand for maintaining the *status quo* of easy divorce, and Jesus who opens the way back to the fullness of the truth of God's plan – in which marriage as an indissoluble union between male and female is something built into the very nature of the human person from creation. Perhaps, for the critics, Jesus needed to be more 'Christ-like' and compassionate!

The reality is that God's law is never opposed to his compassion, because his law shows the path of true love, which is the true fulfilment of human beings. St John Paul II, in his 1993 Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 'The Splendour of Truth' (on the fundamentals of the Church's moral teaching) exposed the emptiness of pretending to be more compassionate than Christ:

'The Church, one hears, is lacking in understanding and compassion. But the Church's motherhood can never in fact be separated from her teaching mission, which she must always carry out as the faithful Bride of Christ, who is the Truth in person. As Teacher, she never tires of proclaiming the moral norm... The Church is in no way the author or the arbiter of this norm. In obedience to the truth which is Christ, whose image is reflected in the nature and dignity of the human person, the Church interprets the moral norm and proposes it to all people of good will, without concealing its demands of radicalness and perfection.'

'In fact, genuine understanding and compassion must mean love for the person, for his true good, for his authentic freedom. And this does not result, certainly, from concealing or weakening moral truth, but rather from proposing it in its most profound meaning as an outpouring of God's eternal Wisdom, which we have received in Christ, and as a service to man, to the growth of his freedom and to the attainment of his happiness.' (VS 95)

But then St John Paul brings in the other essential perspective. The Church does not *just* lovingly proclaim the moral law as the path to freedom and happiness, but also accompanies us sinners in our weakness. Both aspects are needed for followers of Christ, both are needed to be fully Catholic:

‘Still, a clear and forceful presentation of moral truth can never be separated from a profound and heartfelt respect, born of that patient and trusting love which man always needs along his moral journey, a journey frequently wearisome on account of difficulties, weakness and painful situations. The Church can never renounce the “the principle of truth and consistency, whereby she does not agree to call good evil and evil good”; she must always be careful not to break the bruised reed or to quench the dimly burning wick (cf. *Is* 42:3). As Paul VI wrote (Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* 29): “While it is an outstanding manifestation of charity towards souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ, this must always be joined with tolerance and charity, as Christ himself showed by his conversations and dealings with men. Having come not to judge the world but to save it, he was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy towards sinners.” (VS 95)

Pope Francis has especially been highlighting this second aspect of Church teaching (accompanying sinners), while not denying the proclamation of the moral law. (Indeed, already in his pontificate he has reaffirmed virtually all the more ‘controversial’ teachings of the Church.) Both his critics and some of his more immoderate fans do him an injustice (and in the end foment division in the Church), when they represent him as radically breaking with his predecessors (to whom he is actually often referring back), or when they build a mountain out of some of his off-the-cuff remarks. (We can be thankful our own off-the-cuff remarks aren’t all recorded and analysed! Such words of the Pope do not constitute papal teaching.) Just like Benedict XVI and John Paul II before him, Francis teaches both complementary themes – God’s mercy and God’s law – but with his own new emphasis, and unique style that has attracted so many.

Both themes can also be related to our Blessed Mother, and as is customary, St John Paul turns at the end of his Encyclical to show its relation to Mary, so we conclude with his words:

‘Mary shares our human condition, but in complete openness to the grace of God. Not having known sin, she is able to have compassion on every kind of weakness. She understands sinful man and loves him with a Mother’s love. Precisely for this reason she is on the side of truth and shares the Church’s burden in recalling always and to everyone the demands of morality. Nor does she permit sinful man to be deceived by those who claim to love him by justifying his sin, for she knows that the sacrifice of Christ her Son would thus be emptied of its power. No absolution offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy: only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life.’ (VS 120)